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Colonial transformations of song and multilingualism in Tibet

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss song as both an expression and instantiation of language ideologies, examining the ways in which songs, particularly lyrics, explicitly reflect on language issues: praising, demeaning, naming, and describing languages and their use in relatively transparent terms. Secondly, I look at how music enables us to deduce implicit language ideologies, not so much through what is said, but how it is said. Examining patterns of language use in song, including forms of speech, participants, and contexts highlights the perceived value and appropriateness attached to different forms of language. My aim here is to explore how colonialism has transformed language ideologies in ways that contribute to language oppression.

I focus on unrecognized or minoritized languages of Tibet, spoken by people formally designated by the People's Republic of China as Tibetans (most of whom accept this classification, but some do not). Each language is spoken by relatively few people (in the thousands), typically within comparatively small areas. They are almost always considered to be non-standard, non-prestigious speech forms by Tibetans who do not speak them, and are found throughout Tibet, in each of the main ethnolinguistics regions of Amdo, Kham, and U-Tsang, but concentrated in eastern Tibet. These include languages such as Manegacha, Henan Oirat, rTa'u, Khroksyabs, and Tosu.

I focus on these languages because they reveal a central but frequently overlooked aspect of language oppression in Tibet: assimilation of languages within the so-called *minzu* ('nationalities'), as opposed to the far more frequently discussed hierarchical relations between majority and minority *minzu*, i.e., the subordination of all minorities within a Han supremacist framework that sees the national language, Putonghua, promoted at the expense of all other languages in the country.

1. Introduction

Despite the mid-twentieth century decolonization process, and despite several decades of academic attention to the ‘post-colonial’ condition, colonialism is alive and well in the 21st century. It exists not as an ‘after-life’, ‘legacy’, or ‘memory’, but as an ongoing technology of domination and exploitation in places as diverse as Australia, Ethiopia, the USA, Taiwan, Sweden, and Russia. And it exists in the rule of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) over Tibet.

Like colonialism itself, the project of understanding colonialism—its diversity, its violence, its harms, its cunning—is ongoing. In this paper I aim to contribute to the project of understanding colonialism in Tibet: what it is, how it operates, the harm it does, and how it might be resisted. I aim to make both an empirical and a methodological contribution. Empirically, I examine the relationship between colonialism and language oppression, which Taff et al. (2018: 863) define as the ‘enforcement of language loss by physical, mental, social, and spiritual coercion’, by asking *how* colonialism in Tibet enforces language loss. And methodologically, I explore how investigating songs can help us answer this question.

At first glance, a reasonable entry point into an examination of colonialism, songs, and language oppression might seem to be the overt expressions of hatred, prejudice, and the will to dominate and destroy that are found in hate music or the music of genocide (Chastagner 2012; Benesch 2013; Klimczyk & Świerzowska 2015). However, in this paper I will argue that in order to connect colonialism, language oppression, and music in Tibet, we need to look beyond explicit statements of prejudice, hatred, or eliminatory intent, and beyond the treatment of song as merely a venue for text. Instead, I argue that we need to look at song as a social practice, and a medium through which ideas are both expressed and enacted. Specifically, we need to look at song in relation to language ideologies, which are concepts that not only relate to the ‘nature, structure, and use’ of language, but are also a means to ‘envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology’ (Woolard & Schieffelin 1994).

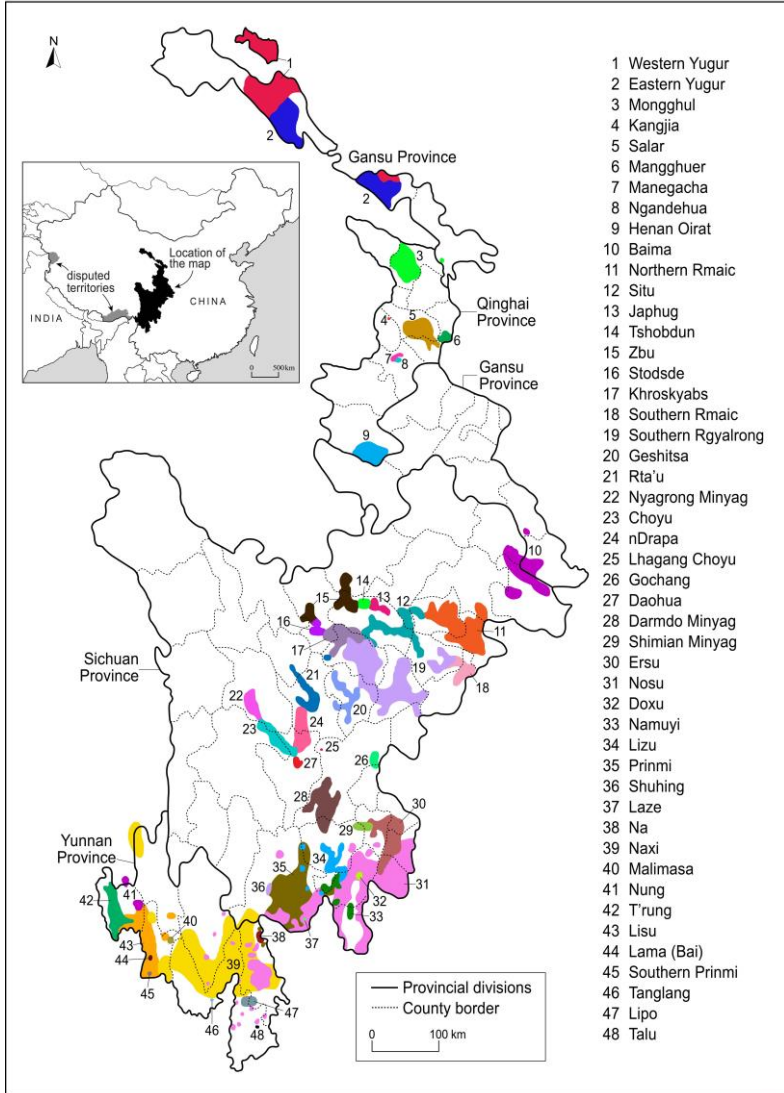
In this paper, I discuss songs as both an *expression* and *instantiation* of language ideologies. For the former, I examine the ways in which songs, particularly lyrics, explicitly reflect on language issues: praising, demeaning, naming, and describing languages and their use in relatively transparent terms. For the latter, I look at how song enables us to deduce implicit language ideologies, by virtue of not so much *what* is said, but *how* it is said. Examining patterns of language use in song—what forms of speech are used, by whom, in what context, and in what ways—enables us to explore language ideologies regarding the perceived value and

appropriateness attached to different forms of language (Feld & Fox 1994; Turpin & Stebbins 2010; Brusila 2015;). My aim is to explore how colonialism has transformed language ideologies in ways that contribute to language oppression.

I focus on a group of languages that I refer to as the unrecognized or minoritized languages of Tibet (for background see Roche & Suzuki 2018).¹ They are spoken by people formally designated by the PRC as Tibetans (most of them accept this classification, but some do not). Each is spoken by relatively few people (in the thousands) and typically within comparatively small areas (see Figure 1). They are almost always considered to be non-standard, non-prestigious speech forms by Tibetans who do not speak those languages; they are found throughout Tibet, in each of the main ethno-linguistics regions of Amdo, Kham, and U-Tsang, but are concentrated in eastern Tibet. Some of the specific languages we will meet include Manegacha, Henan Oirat, rTa'u, Khroksyabs, and Tosu. But they are also often known to Tibetans beyond the speaker community by broader hypernyms that refer to language groups rather than specific languages: *Rgyal rong skad* and *Mi nyag skad* are two examples.

¹ I do not include Tibetan Sign Language here (see Hofer 2017).

Minority Languages of the Eastern Tibetsphere



Cartography: Chandra Jayasuriya. Language data: Gerald Roche and Hiroyuki Suzuki.



Figure 1: Map showing the minoritized languages of eastern Tibet, where much of Tibet's linguistic diversity is concentrated. This map includes languages spoken by Tibetans and other minzu, and excludes Tibetic and Sinitic languages.

I focus on these languages because they reveal a central but frequently overlooked aspect of language oppression in Tibet, namely, assimilation of languages *within* the so-called *minzu* ('nationalities'), as opposed to the far more frequently discussed issue of hierarchical relations between majority and minority *minzu*, i.e., the subordination of all minorities within a Han supremacist framework that sees the national language, Putonghua, promoted at the expense of all other languages in the country.

I start below with an examination of the pre-colonial situation, looking at a range of language ideologies that circulated amongst Tibetans prior to the establishment of the PRC's colonial rule in Tibet, and then examine song practices in several different communities where minoritized languages were spoken, to identify what sort of language ideologies were instantiated in these practices. Section 3 explores the transformation of these practices and ideologies under colonialism, in particular, the emergence of overt expressions of language ideologies in Tibetan popular music since 2008. In the conclusion, I look at the recent emergence of songs in minoritized languages, and explore what this novel practice might tell us about the constantly shifting nature of oppression and resistance under the PRC's colonial rule.

2. Language ideologies in pre-colonial Tibet

A variety of language ideologies existed in pre-colonial Tibet, expressed in a range of formats and media. Instead of attempting to reduce these down to a two-dimensional, generically Tibetan view of language, it is important to consider these ideologies in their diversity and, often, contradictoriness. As discussed later, the transformation of language ideologies under colonialism has involved the state intervening in this rich ideological field, not in order to replace 'Tibetan' language ideologies with 'Chinese' ones, but rather to selectively highlight, manipulate, recontextualize, and redeploy pre-existing ideologies to new and harmful ends: colonialism, like racism, is a 'scavenger ideology' that takes 'bits and pieces from other systems of thought' and bends them 'to its own will' (Mosse 1995: 164). A complete survey of all language ideologies circulating in Tibet is beyond the scope of this paper, e.g., we know very little about the language ideologies expressed in minoritized languages. However, in this section I aim to introduce some of the more prominent ideologies in order to contextualize the transformations that have taken place in Tibet since the mid-20th century.²

² This reconstruction is based on a variety of sources, including oral traditions (often recorded in the colonial period), Tibetan texts, and ethnographic studies conducted in both the pre-colonial and colonial periods. In the absence of explicit records, this reconstruction should be treated as a tentative outline.

The Tibetan proverb *lung pa re la skad lugs re/ bla ma re la chos lugs re* ‘every valley has its own way of speaking, and each lama has their own Dharma’ captures an important aspect of pre-colonial language ideologies.³ Linguistic diversity was recognized, expected, and accepted as a matter-of-fact part of life. Tourandre & Robin (2006: 159-160) also present a number of similar proverbs that demonstrate the taken-for-granted nature of linguistic diversity in pre-colonial Tibet:

ཕོ་ཡ་རབས་མ་རབས་སྤྱོད་པས་ཤེས
ཡུལ་ས་ཕྱགས་གང་ཡིན་སྐད་སྐྱེས་ཤེས

pho ya rabs ma rabs spyod pas shes
yul sa phyogs gang yin skad kyes shes

A person’s quality can be known by their behavior
A person’s origins can be known by their speech

སྐྱོད་སྤུག་གང་ཡིན་གཞས་ཀྱིས་ཤེས
ལུང་པ་གང་ཡིན་སྐད་ཀྱིས་ཤེས

skyid sdug gang yin gzhas kyis shes
lung pa gang yin skad kyis shis

You can tell how someone feels when they sing
You can tell where someone is from when they speak

གལ་ཏེ་ཚུ་ཅིག་ཅིག་འཇུང་ན་སྐད་ཅིག་ཅིག་ཡོང་ང་ཚོག
ཚུ་སོ་སོ་འཇུང་ན་སྐད་སོ་སོ་ཡོང་ང་ཚོག

gal te chu cig cig ‘thung na skad cig cig yong nga nog
chu so so ‘thung na skad so so yong nga nog

Those who drink from the same river speak the same
Those who drink from different rivers speak differently

Beyond this, there are numerous reasons to believe that linguistic diversity was not only recognized, but valued, in pre-colonial Tibet, at least at some

³ This version is listed in Cüppers & Sørensen (1998). They also list the following proverbs on the same theme: *bla ma re la phyag len re/ lung ba re la skad lugs re* ‘Every lama has their own practice, and every valley has its own way of speaking’ (Cüppers & Sørensen 1998: 172) and *g.yag gcig la mgo re yod / lung pa gcig la skad lugs yod* ‘There’s one head on every yak, and one way of speaking in every valley’ (Cüppers & Sørensen 1998: 233) (my translations).

times and by some people. For example, at the level of practice, the everyday use of Sanskrit in household ritual demonstrated an openness to the presence of other languages in speech. In terms of role and status, we find the translator (*lo tsa ba*) and the task of translation set aside as distinct and esteemed (Schaeffer 2009). And we also see efforts to make the Dharma available to people in the languages they understand best, such as in the vernacularization of the Dharma into Amdo Tibetan by Dkon *mchog bstan pa'i sgron me* (Róna-Tas 2014; Zeisler 2008). Taken together with the widespread recognition of diversity found in proverbial wisdom, these suggest that pre-colonial Tibet was characterized by a certain extent of pluralism, in the sense of ideologies and practices that ‘make it possible for diverse language groups to live together’ (Haugen 1985: 4).

However, such pluralism was only part of a much more complex story. Whilst capacity to use and move between different speech forms was in some ways valued, this does not mean that all speech forms were always valued equally. Rather, clear hierarchies of value were often brought into play, and this was often seen in language naming practices (Suzuki, forthcoming). Whilst the names of Tibetan varieties are typically tied to place, e.g. *Khams skad*, *Lha sa skad*, *A mdo skad*, *The bo skad*, and so on, minoritized languages were often referred to by Tibetan speakers in terms that referenced their subordinate status and deviation from perceived norms, such as *logs skad*, which implies ‘inverse’ or ‘backwards’ talk (Suzuki & Wangmo 2016). Another term is *'dre skad*, which can be translated as ‘demonic’ or ‘ghost’ talk, though an alternative interpretation is *'dras skad*, ‘mixed talk’ (Thurston 2018a). Both *logs skad* and *'dre skad* are pejorative, and assign these speech forms to a subordinate status in a language hierarchy, which sees Tibetan varieties as normal or standard, and minoritized languages as deviant.

Broadly, we can see this subordination of minoritized languages as coherent with a wider Tibetan civilizing project that divided various peoples into categories of civilized and uncivilized (Pommaret 1999; Shneiderman 2006; Huber 2011), primarily, but not exclusively, in relation to their perceived religious affiliation. The appellation ‘barbarian’ (*kla klo*) could be applied to any number of people and peoples, depending on who was using it. For example, from the perspective of Lhasa, *Mgo log* pastoralists could be seen as barbarians, and their speech likewise subordinated and stigmatized (Jacoby 2016). Other barbarians could include a variety of people who, viewed from Lhasa or other Tibetan centers, were deemed peripheral and subordinate, such as the so-called ‘Monpa’, who Pommaret (1999: 53) describes as being subject to a ‘certain condescending and despising attitude’, even ‘a “colonialist” attitude’ by Tibetans. Huber (2011: 262), in his exploration of Tibetan ‘adventurism, exploitation, and expansion’, in the eastern Himalaya, refers to ‘indigenous Tibetan cultural schemes of ethnic superiority’ that depicted the ‘non-Buddhist, pre-literate highland communities of the far eastern Himalaya’ in ‘highly pejorative terms’ (Huber

2011: 260). Taken together, these ways of marking people as subordinate serve to simultaneously recognize and subordinate diversity, fixing certain populations, and their ways of speaking, as permanently inferior.

Another important bundle of language ideologies that circulated in pre-colonial Tibet went further than the subordination of certain languages, and actively countered the recognition of linguistic diversity; instead of a program of subordination it advanced one of assimilation. This position saw varieties of Tibetan, as well as (in certain cases) minoritized languages, as being derived from the written language; instead of diversity, we have deviation and decay from an ideal unitary state, i.e., diversity is the result of a process of drift (away from a standard form) and dissolution (of unity and wholeness); see Kellner (2018). Coherent with broader narratives that see both Tibet and Buddhism as ‘in decline’ (Meriam 2012), the diversity of languages in Tibet is viewed as a symptom of a negative trajectory that should be resisted, if not rectified. Thus, Tsepon Shakabpa (2010) describes the speech of ‘Lhodruk, Sikkim, Ladakh, Mönpa, Sherpa, Tamang, and so forth’ as ‘corruptions [of] original Tibetan’, and Dge ’dun chos phel (1978) advocates ‘strict adherence’ to the written form in order to preserve the unity of ‘diverse dialects’ and counter the ‘dangerous trend’ of vernacularization, which he equates with political, ideological, and linguistic fragmentation. I follow Lippi-Green (1997) in calling these ‘standard language ideologies.’

Beyond these ideologies of pluralism, subordination, and standardization, we must also note the ways in which Tibetan, as script and enunciated text, was considered sacred and treated as such. Texts were treated with reverence: placed and held aloft to avoid ‘pollution,’ paraded around fields to protect crops, and housed in shrines and monasteries. This applied not only to texts, in the sense of books, but to text itself: chiseled on rocks, scraped onto hillsides,⁴ burnt rather than discarded, and so on (Ekvall 1964). This extended to reading practices, which, in the pre-colonial period, focused primarily on the recitation of texts, rather than silent reading, learnt through a painstaking process of repetition (Dreyfus 2003; Lempert 2012). Recitation was the production of a venerated text-object in sound, an act of fidelity and devotion. Beyond its role as a physical and sound object, Tibetan was also a repository of wisdom. Sonam Lhundrop (2017: 157) describes Tibetan as ‘the source of inspirations in life’, which provides a means to contemplate and understand fundamental mysteries such as ‘the purpose of life and sources of happiness’. The study of the Tibetan language was a religious enterprise: grammar texts were ‘sacred grammars’ (Tournadre 2010; Graf 2019). Given these multiple intersections of sacredness, power, and insight associated with the written

⁴ This is done by spreading salt over the hillside, and then letting yaks lick and eat the grass and soil, leaving a text scraped into the hillside.

language, I follow Fishman (2002) in thinking about Tibetan as both a ‘beloved’ and a ‘holy’ language.

Finally, we also need to consider language ideologies that related to minoritized languages and circulated within those communities. These are much harder to access, compared to understandings of and attitudes towards Tibetan, which have not only been recorded in text but also much more extensively studied. Practices related to language names give us some insight into language ideologies within these communities, e.g., in Rebgong, in Amdo, two minoritized languages are referred to as Manegacha and Ngandehua by their speakers, both meaning, in their respective languages, ‘our language’. Other language naming practices tie language to place, for example, many of the Rgyalrong-speaking communities refer to their languages as *rongske*, the speech of the (agricultural) valleys. Another instance was the widespread practices of patrilocal language oppression, according to which in-married wives were expected to adopt the dominant language of their husband’s household.⁵ Running through all of these practices is what Woolard (2016: 22) refers to as ideologies of authenticity: the idea that specific speech varieties were tied to a particular ‘social and geographic territory’.

This extremely brief overview, then, provides a sketch of the language ideologies in circulation in pre-colonial Tibet: ideologies of pluralism, subordination, standardization, reverence, and authenticity. In the next section, I examine what we can learn about how these ideologies were enacted in communities where minoritized languages were spoken, as seen through song.

3. Songs and language in pre-colonial Tibet

In looking at pre-colonial multilingualism and song in Tibet, it is necessary to deduce language ideologies from their instantiation, rather than explicit statements, by turning to ethnographic studies of cultural life in specific communities. There were three broad patterns relating to the use of language in song among minoritized language communities:

⁵ This is referred to as ‘life-cycle bilingualism’; see Roche (2017). Important exceptions to this pattern existed in communities that were matrifocal and did not practice patrilocal marriage, such as amongst the nDrapa-speaking and Khroskyabs-speaking communities.

1. the spoken and sung languages of the community were totally different, with the sung language being based on literary Tibetan, and the spoken language a minoritized language;
2. Tibetan dominated in oral tradition but the local, minoritized language was used in some limited instances; and
3. in several cases musical traditions were dominated by local languages, but other practices associated with language tied the community to a broader Tibetan world.

Each case is examined separately below, with examples.

Situation (1) was widespread among speakers of minoritized languages of Tibet such as Manegacha, which is today spoken by about 8,000 Tibetans in Rebgong, in Amdo (Fried 2010; Roche 2019b). They are confined to four large villages stretching along the valley of the Dgu River.⁶ In the pre-colonial context, bilingualism in Tibetan and Manegacha was common but not universal, and was heavily gendered, with men being far more likely to know and use Tibetan than women, due to their roles as monks, and their engagement in long-distance trade with Tibetan pastoral communities. Communal rituals in the Manegacha-speaking villages were almost entirely in Tibetan,⁷ and so were folk songs. In interviews conducted in 2016 and 2017 in these communities, respondents typically replied with incredulity to questions about singing in Manegacha: the idea was both hilarious and nonsensical. Singing exclusively in Tibetan was seen as appropriate, while, on the other hand, singing in Manegacha was often described as impossible, perhaps because singing required the construction of lyrics in written Tibetan, whereas Manegacha is currently unwritten.

Situation (1) seems to have pertained in communities across Tibet, particularly in the highly multilingual eastern region. In the same valley where Manegacha is spoken, the Ngandehua-speaking Tibetan community followed the same practice (Tshe ring skyid 2015). In the Gyalrong region, song traditions appear to have been in Tibetan, whereas a number of different languages were spoken (Gates 2014). In nearby areas of Kham, most

⁶ The language is also spoken elsewhere, but not by Tibetans. In Gansu province, approximately 23,000 people currently identified as belonging to the Bao'an *minzu* also speak Manegacha. However, there is currently no or very little contact between Manegacha-speakers in Qinghai and Gansu, and each considers themselves distinct from the other. A major cleavage between the two populations is that the Gansu population of Manegacha-speakers practice Islam. For a comparative discussion of the two populations, see Batty (2019).

⁷ Excluding some very limited use of Manegacha in one ritual, see Roche & Lcag mo tshe ring (2013).

linguistically distinct communities seemed to have followed similar practices. Data collected in a survey about Tibet's minority languages⁸ indicates that this was so for speakers of Choyu, nDrapa, Darmdo Minyag, and rTa'u, for example. A detailed ethnographic study of oral traditions in the Minyag-speaking communities of Nyag rong⁹ demonstrates that their rich song tradition was entirely in Tibetan (Bkra shis bzang po 2012).

In other minoritized language communities, the majority of the local song repertoire was in Tibetan, but a few items or genres were in the local language, e.g., Khroskyabs, Gochang, and Henan Oirat. In the Khroskyabs-speaking community, most songs were in Tibetan, but an important exception were working songs that previously accompanied agricultural labor of breaking clods and ploughing. Although the lyrics were primarily vocables, G.yu lha (2012) identifies the songs as being in Khroskyabs. For Gochang speakers to the east of Dar rtse mdo, multilingualism was present in their song repertoire in a different manner. Although most songs were sung in Tibetan, the local retelling of the *Gesar* epic used both Gochang and Tibetan: the narrative was in Gochang, but when characters broke into song, Tibetan was used (Roche & Yudru Tsomu 2018). Finally, in Oirat-speaking communities in Henan, in Amdo, the local language was restricted to a single occasion and place: the new year celebrations of the Henan 'prince'. Here, several short dialogues in Oirat were employed, with a number of songs in the language (Balogh 2017; Lha mo sgröl ma & Roche 2014); otherwise, their song traditions were the same as nearby Amdo Tibetan speakers.

But there were also communities which had a rich musical tradition in their own languages, whilst also maintaining some connection to the broader Tibetan community, whether through historical narratives, shared oral traditions, or other means. A well-documented example is the musical repertoire of Namuyi speakers whose song repertoire is entirely in Namuyi, and includes a variety of genres not found elsewhere in the broader canon of Tibetan folk music (Libu Lakhi et al. 2009). Nonetheless, the Namuyi community had ties to Tibet through historical narratives, which placed their origin in Tibet, and also through the use of Tibetan scriptures in certain religious practices (Libu Lakhi, Hefright & Stuart 2007). Speakers of nearby Lizu, Tosu (Duoxu), and Ersu (Chirkova 2014) all had a similar musical tradition, consisting entirely of songs in the local language, but with

⁸ For details of this survey, see the draft report, available at https://zenodo.figshare.com/articles/Draft_Report_on_Tibet_s_Linguistic_Minorities/5992582/1 (accessed 2020-11-23).

⁹ Although the minoritized languages spoken by Tibetans in Nyrong and Darmdo are both locally referred to as Minyag, they are distinct and speakers cannot understand each other.

(sometimes contested) ties to Tibet, primarily through the use of Tibetan scriptures in religious practices.¹⁰

Finally, it is also worth noting that whilst there were some Tibetan communities that did not sing in Tibetan, there were communities that sang in Tibetan, at least in part, but did not identify as Tibetan. An example is Mongghul speakers of northern Amdo, who live primarily in the valleys and mountains to the north of Zi ling (Xining) and practise a diverse song repertoire that includes songs in Mongghul, Chinese, and Tibetan, including some in more than one language (Limusishiden 2015).

This brief overview suggests that pre-colonial language ideologies associated language with context; much like the pre-colonial multilingualism described by Mitchell (2009) in southern India, languages were used for specific purposes, and there was no necessary expectation that ‘people X’ should use ‘language X’ in every situation. This form of multilingualism did not link language use to communicative needs, so that, e.g., it was appropriate for Minyag speakers around Dar rtse mdo to sing in Tibetan even if few people present understood the lyrics. Therefore, the choice of song language was not necessarily tied to either intelligibility or identity in any straightforward way; people were not necessarily singing to communicate semantically, nor were they singing in ways that suggested things like, *this language is me*, or *this language is us*. These practices are most concordant with ideologies of pluralism, though the use of Tibetan in songs by minoritized language speakers also had clear connections with ideologies that framed Tibetan as a holy and beloved language. What is markedly absent from all these practices are ideologies of subordination and standardization.

4. Colonialism and language ideologies in contemporary Tibet

Although policies and practices of the PRC party-state towards languages have shifted since the country’s founding in 1949, e.g., passing through an aggressively assimilationist phase during the Cultural Revolution, the basic structural arrangements underlying them have not. The PRC’s treatment of colonized populations is mediated by a static, implicit logic (Wolfe 2006, 2016) rather than dynamic, explicit policy (Shohamy 2006). So in this section, although I will provide an overview of how policy has changed over time, and hence how Tibetan responses to them have changed, it is important to begin with an examination of the underlying structural logic that has remained

¹⁰ Chirkova, who has conducted extensive research with Lizu, Ersu, and Tosu speakers, has archived several Lizu songs <http://www.katia-chirkova.info/sounds/lizu-songs/> (accessed 2020-11-23). See also Wu (2015).

consistent since 1949. This logic sets up a division between three categories of languages (see Roche 2019a): the national language, Putonghua, so-called ‘minority’ languages (which are subordinated to the national language), and unrecognized languages (which are erased from public discourse and excluded from public life). The PRC is thus best characterized not as a ‘Manichean’ colonial state based solely on a binary division between colonizer and colonized (Powell 2003), but instead as an ‘empire of nations’ (Hirsch 2000) organized around a distinction between surplus peoples and languages slated for elimination, national minorities slated for subordination and exploitation, and a single Han majority and national language designated as the ideal norm and apex of socialist evolution (Mullaney 2010).

In applying this typology to the Tibetan case, the subordinated but recognized ‘minority’ language is ‘Tibetan’, typically the written language, which is used in publishing, formal schooling, and a range of other state-supported activities and contexts (Roche 2017a), and is assumed to relate unproblematically to a single spoken language. Some diversity is recognized in broadcast media, where the ‘dialects’ are also promoted as means of communication, with broadcasting services available in Amdo, Kham, and U-Tsang Tibetan (Green 2012). This contrasts starkly with the situation faced by minoritized languages, which are completely erased from policy discourses and excluded from public life and institutions. They are not taught in schools, used in broadcast media, cannot be used to access any public services such as healthcare or legal protection, and so on, all because the state refuses to acknowledge their existence (Roche & Yudru Tsomu 2018).

It is important to understand that this distinction, between recognized but subordinate, and erased and excluded, does not imply that Tibetan is not being marginalized and suppressed. Nor does it imply that Tibetan grievances in relation to their holy and beloved language are unfounded. It means that these two categories of language are subjected to very different treatments by the state’s colonial logic. Acknowledging this not only helps us understand why the languages face very different predicaments today, but also why the modes of resistance required to ensure a future must be completely different. So, while all languages in the PRC are equally subordinated to Putonghua, and all are subjected to colonial violence, the intensity and nature of that violence differs in important ways for subordinated and erased languages.

Changes in language policy since 1949 have reflected the differing statuses of these categories of languages. The treatment of unrecognized languages has remained static: the state’s refusal to recognize them has not changed. However, the subordination of Tibetan has oscillated in intensity over time (see Tsering Shakya 1994). During the 1950s there was a relatively liberal period where Tibetan was promoted by the state, primarily as a means of ideological indoctrination. Massive translation and corpus development initiatives were undertaken, creating and promulgating a new lexicon to discuss Marxism in Tibetan. Following the events of 1958 and the turn to a

much more repressive and assimilatory regime, these language developments continued, including, e.g., publication of Mao's 'little red book' in Tibetan during the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, however, opportunities to use and learn Tibetan were severely curtailed: in many places the language was banned.

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, this extremely repressive approach to Tibetan language was rolled back, beginning in the late 1970s. But the refusal to acknowledge the existence of unrecognized languages remained the same, meaning that speakers today continue, effectively, to live through something like the Cultural Revolution in terms of how the state relates to their languages. For Tibetan, the post-Mao era has been one of oscillating support. A Tibetan-medium education system has been established and in some places universalized, and then, wherever it exists, eroded and undermined.¹¹ Tibetan writing and publishing have flourished and, as explored in the next section, a vibrant (but not profitable) Tibetan music industry has appeared. The state has also continued to maintain and develop a variety of institutions that support the Tibetan language, including the *National Tibetan Language Terminology Standardization Working Committee* (Thurston 2018a).

At the same time as providing this limited support to Tibetan, the state has also undermined it through a number of measures. Most importantly has been the enshrining of Putonghua as a compulsory language for all citizens of the PRC, and its aggressive promotion through education and the media, and the use of Putonghua proficiency measures in employment (Roche 2020a). At the same time, the country's aggressive developmentalist agenda, specifically implemented in Tibet through the *Great Western Development* program, has seen communities' subsistence bases eroded, coerced participation in wage labor, increasing urbanization (often through forced resettlement), generally undermined rural communities, and massively increased economic inequalities between Tibetans (Fischer 2013; Makley 2018). In this context of state-sponsored economic dismantling of communities and state-mandated promotion of Putonghua, the meagre measures provided by the state to support Tibetan have failed miserably, producing heightened linguistic anxieties (Bulag 2003), and deep fears of the language's impending elimination.

Tibetans have reacted with a variety of forms of political resistance. The protests that swept across Tibet in 2008 form a crucial watershed in the shifting terrain of Tibetan identity and its relation to language, leading to the

¹¹ The literature on Tibetan education has so far focused exclusively on a single Tibetan language, and has not addressed the predicament of Tibet's minoritized languages.

emergence of what Zhogs dung (2016) has called ‘a new awareness of nationality, culture and territory’. Following these protests, a specifically language-focused protest movement emerged, particularly in Amdo, with street demonstrations taking place between 2010 and 2012 (Henry 2016). Across the same period, self-immolation protests began, with Tibetans setting their bodies ablaze and choosing to die in terrible agony to protest PRC rule, including language oppression. Meanwhile, a grass-roots language movement took shape called the *pha skad gtsang ma* ‘pure father-tongue’ movement, which aimed to resist the influx of Chinese loanwords into Tibetan, and to promote the use of Tibetan neologisms in their place (Robin 2014; McConnell 2015; Thurston 2018a). A final feature of this period has been the emergence of a nascent language rights discourse in Tibet (Roche 2020a), building on the increasing visibility of human rights discourses since 2008 (Robin 2016). The post-2008 period, then, has seen intensifying attention among Tibetans in the PRC to language as a political issue. However, this focus has remained on a single Tibetan language; as yet no movement has emerged to protect and assert rights for any of the unrecognized languages of Tibet.

Returning now to the pre-colonial language ideologies of pluralism, subordination, standardization, reverence, and authenticity discussed above, developments within the colonial era can be summarized as follows. First, the state has carried out a sustained attack on ideologies of pluralism, promoting instead ideologies that collapse identity and language into an isomorphic relationship of one people, one language. This same maneuver has also confronted and challenged ideologies of authenticity that relate minoritized languages to place and community, replacing local and other identities with ‘nationality’ (*minzu*) identity, and alienating this identity from all languages other than Tibetan. At the same time, the state has also undermined ideologies of reverence by subordinating Tibetan to Putonghua and written Chinese, rendering the beloved and holy language ‘backward’ and ‘parochial’, and a source of stigma and suffering rather than prestige and power. Despite this subordination of Tibetan to Putonghua, the state’s erasure of minoritized languages has also lent legitimacy to standardizing ideologies: the languages the state seeks to eliminate as surplus are the same as those which are seen as threats to the unity and integrity of Tibetan. In a similar manner, the state’s concerted erasure of minoritized languages also legitimizes ideologies of subordination, providing powerful authorization to attitudes that see these languages as lesser than ‘standard’ Tibetan. It is within this field of radically altered language ideologies that we must consider the issue of language in contemporary Tibetan pop music.

5. Tibetan pop songs and language ideologies in the colonial present

Tibetan pop music, in the last decade, has frequently and explicitly reproduced concerns over Tibetan language that were popularized following the 2008 protests (Roche 2020b). This focus on language in Tibetan pop songs built on developments starting in the 1980s, when the post-Mao relaxation of aggressive assimilatory policies enable crypto-nationalist Tibetan pop songs to emerge (Stirr 2008). Although following pro-independence protests in 1989, some Tibetan songs with nationalist themes were banned, more such songs continued to be produced, and became increasingly explicit in their assertions of Tibetan identity across the 1990s and into the 21st century (Dhondup 2008; Tsering Drolma & Wilson 2009; Lama Jabb 2011; Morcom 2007, 2008, 2011, 2015). Warner (2013: 543) argues that in the years leading up to widespread protests across Tibet in 2008, pop music formed an integral part of a Tibetan protest language, as an ‘uncivil religion ...which emphasizes Tibetan cultural, linguistic, and religious autonomy within China’.

Following the 2008 protests, one of the most immediately observable impacts on Tibetan pop songs was a widespread shift from the use of Chinese language in songs, to the use of Tibetan, accompanied by a popular movement to censure singers who used Chinese. One example is a promotional outreach activity for the film *Tharlo*, released in cinemas in 2016. A number of short videos were circulated online, showing several Tibetan singers encouraging viewers to go and see the movie. Some spoke in Tibetan, some in Chinese. Social media soon bristled with denunciations of the Chinese-speaking Tibetan singers. They were referred to as ‘Chinese dogs’ (*rgya khyi*), ‘offspring of China’ (*rgya phrug*), and ‘China-lovers’ (*rgya dga*). An online poll that appeared soon after found that 79% of 4,346 respondents felt that it was not appropriate for the singers ‘to reject their own language’ (15% said that it was ‘appropriate’, while 4% were indifferent – see Figure 2). At this time, Tibetan pop songs therefore became a carefully scrutinized instantiation of language ideologies, where ideas about context, appropriateness, and identity became highly charged.

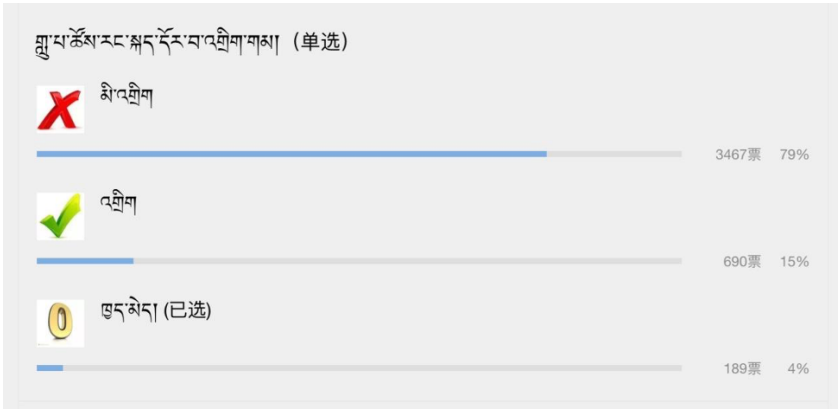


Figure 2: Results of an online survey about language rejection.

But beyond this, Tibetan pop songs have also become a venue for explicit expressions of language ideologies: statements about language, its use, its nature, predicament, and fate. Pop songs became an important venue for spreading ideas of the *pha skad gtsang ma* ‘pure father tongue’ movement, almost certainly more accessible and influential than the writing of poets, scholars, academics, and other Tibetan public intellectuals (Thurston 2018b). Here, I review several key features of the language ideology discourses that are found in post-2008 lyrics, namely: the singularity of the Tibetan language; the ‘essential’ relationship of this language to Tibetan identity; exhortations to speak ‘pure Tibetan’; and, more generally, the didactic nature of these songs, and their explicit aim of managing linguistic behavior through moral and emotional censure (Roche 2020b).

To begin, Tibetan pop songs about the language suggest that it is singular. This is sometimes stated overtly, such as *skad dang yi ge cgig red* ‘one spoken and written language’, but more often the singularity of the language is implied. So we see, e.g., common use of *rang skad* ‘one’s own language’ versus *gzhan skad* ‘others’ language’ to distinguish Tibetan from Chinese. And rather than referring to that language overtly as *bod skad* ‘Tibetan’, the songs usually use *pha skad* ‘father-tongue’, not only tying language to notions of descent, but also to broader conceptualizations of belonging and patrimony, as seen in terms such as *pha yul* ‘fatherland’, *pha gzhis*, ‘paternal estate’, and *pha nor* ‘patrimony’. The implicit singularity of the language is also connected to discourses of unity, as both a pre-existing condition, and a goal to strive for. The idea of unity as merely descriptive is seen in the frequent appeal to the idea that Tibetans are all *khyim tshang gcig gi yin* ‘one family’, whereas the idea that unity is something that needs to be worked towards is most clearly seen in the well-known song The Sound of Unity (*mtshun sgril gyi rang*

sgra) by Sher bstan,¹² which exhorts *bod pa tsho* ‘Tibetans’ to unite for the sake of the nation. Collective unity and linguistic singularity coalesce to form a powerful standardist language ideology that collapses Tibetan identity onto linguistic homogeneity.

A special relationship to Tibetan identity is also asserted, with the Tibetan language referred to as the soul, or essence of the Tibetan people, typically using the terms *bla*, *bla srog*, or *tsho srog*. For example, Rin chen rdo rje describes the language as *mi rigs kyi bla srog* ‘the essence of the nation’,¹³ and Chos ’phel, calls it his *nga ’i tsho srog gi nying po* ‘soul’s heart’.¹⁴ Beyond these pop songs, this idea of the Tibetan language as the soul of the nation is often circulated in memes, which not only assert this essentialist relationship, but also often contrast it with ‘others’ languages’ as ‘adornments’ rather than vital essence (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: The text in this meme states, ‘The father tongue is the essence; others’ language is an adornment’.

By calling language the soul of the nation, these discourses seem to be drawing on Romantic concepts of vitality and distinction encapsulated in the concept of *geist* (or spirit) (see Bauman & Briggs 2003), rather than Tibetan notions of the soul. Such Romantic linguistic ideologies are seen in nationalist claims all around the world that the language is the soul of the nation: in his study of ‘positive ethnolinguistic consciousness,’ Fishman (1996) describes such assertions as one of the most common themes found in discourses about language.

Contemporary Tibetan pop songs that contain explicit statements of language ideologies also frequently make reference to *pha skad gtsang ma* ‘pure father-tongue’ or *bod skad gtsang ma* ‘pure Tibetan’ as an ideal form.

¹² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Fc_hKYGJbg; and English translation of the lyrics, and discussion of song, is available at <https://highpeakspureearth.com/2010/two-songs-about-tibetan-unity-mentally-return-and-the-sound-of-unity/> (both accessed 2020-11-23).

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3S8HS971W2o> (accessed 2020-11-23)

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDqBXnUaMvY> (accessed 2020-11-23)

As mentioned above, this identification of ‘pure’ language is part of a broader grassroots campaign to promote Tibetan speech forms without Chinese loanwords as the ideal form of Tibetan (Thurston 2018a; Yang 2018). The songs do not simply mention or describe ‘pure’ language, but also exhort listeners to speak pure Tibetan: the refrain *pha skad gtsang ma shod* ‘speak pure father tongue!’ is frequently heard. Pure Tibetan is also contrasted with *sbrags skad*, *sres skad*, or *ra ma lug skad* ‘mixed language’ as a de-valued form of speech.

Exhortations to speak pure Tibetan are typical of the generally moralistic, didactic, and exhortative nature of Tibetan pop songs about language. These directives attempt to regulate listeners’ linguistic behavior through emotional and moral censure: to encourage them to speak in certain ways, and to feel certain things about different speech forms. In particular, shame is frequently mobilized: one should feel ashamed to speak ‘mixed’ language, one should feel ashamed to speak the language of others. This appeal to shame often references a quote attributed to the 10th Panchen Lama, as seen in the chorus of the song *Ga kha gsum bcu*, by Skäl bzang bstan ’dzin:¹⁵

བརྗེ་ཚུན་གྱི་གངས་ལྗོངས་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་།

Dear children of the Snowlands,

བོད་རང་ལ་ཁ་དངེ་ཞིག་ཡོད་དེ།

Tibetans have our own proverb

སྐད་རིགས་ཐམས་ཅད་ཤེས་ན་བཟང་མོད་ཀྱང་།

It’s good to know all sorts of languages, but

རང་གི་ཕ་སྐད་བརྗེད་ན་ངོ་ཚ་ཡིན།

It’s shameful to forget your own father tongue.

The themes of singularity, essentialism, purity, and exhortation are brought together in the recent song *Bod skad* ‘Tibetan Language’ by Pemsî & Tenzin Sungyi.¹⁶ Although it is from the exile community, rather than Tibetans in the PRC, is it worth quoting in this context due to the way it not only combines these themes but also expresses them with a clarity not possible in the PRC, where censorship by a punitive state suppresses such explicit expressions of political views about language.

¹⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJaILctNsZQ> (accessed 2020-11-23)

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nya0fljWIKw> (accessed 2020-11-23).

ལ་བའི་ལྗངས་ཀྱི་ང་ཚོའི་བོད་སྐད་འདི།	This language of the land of snow ¹⁷
མི་རིགས་ཀྱི་སྤྲོ་སྲོག་ཡིན།	Is a soul of the Tibetan people
བོད་མི་ཆུན་གཞིན་ཚང་མས་བོད་སྐད་གཙང་མ་སྦྱོར་རྟོགས།	Please, Tibetans of all ages, speak undiluted Tibetan
ལ་ཡན་ཚད་ལབ་ཀ་ཙམ་མིན།	This is not empty talk
དོན་དངོས་ལ་ཡོད་པ་འདི་མར་བཤད།	What is being expressed here is the truth
ད་དུང་ལས་བསམ་སྒོ་ཅི་ཡང་མ་འཁོར་ན།	If still that doesn't make you realize
ང་རང་ཚོའི་མི་རིགས་འདི་ག་ལེར་བཞག་པ།	Soon, our race may extinct
ང་བོད་རིགས་མིའི་རྒྱུ་འཛིན་ཡིན།	I am the inheritor of the Tibetan race
བོད་སྐད་ངའི་སྲོག་དང་ཆ་ཡིན།	Tibetan language is like my soul
མཐར་ཐུག་འཆེ་སྲོག་ལ་ཐུག་ནའི་ལས།	Even at the risk of my life
བོད་སྐད་ངས་མ་བརྗེད་པར་གཙང་མ་ཅིག་མར་བཤད།	I will speak undiluted Tibetan without fail
སྐད་གཏོར་བཤེག་གཏོང་མཁན་ར་མ་ལུག	Those who speak hodgepodge language, are the destroyer of our language
སྐད་བརྒྱབ་རྒྱུ་ཚང་མ་ལ་མ་རྩུག	Whatever is spoken, makes me sick
ཕྱོགས་བཞི་མཚམས་བརྒྱུད་ནས་སྤྲུག་པའི་སྐད་གོ་དུས་ང་རོ་རེ་ཚ་ཡ་འདུག།	I feel ashamed when I hear people speak words picked from everywhere
ལྟང་མེད་པའི་སྐད་ཆ་ཡ་སྦྲེད་གསང་མེད།	I don't hide my sincere expression
ཚོ་འདིར་ང་བོད་པའི་མིའི་སྐྱེ་བ་ལེན།	Born as a Tibetan in this life
བོད་སྐད་ལ་མཐོང་མ་བྱེད་བརྒྱབ་ཡས་ལ་རོ་ཚ་ན།	If you don't respect and even feel ashamed to speak Tibetan
བོད་པ་ཡིན་ལབ་པ་ལས་དུག་བུང་བྱས་ཤི་བཟང་ན་དགའ།	It is better to poison yourself rather than saying I am Tibetan

¹⁷ Translations are from the film clip on Youtube.

The language ideologies expressed here are in many ways direct responses to the increasingly oppressive nature of the PRC's colonial rule in Tibet. For example, the efforts to promote linguistic purism are a direct response to the state's failure to support corpus planning measure for Tibetan, or to provide a meaningful educational system that actually supports the acquisition and use of Tibetan. The exhortations for individual involvement in the maintenance of language are, to a significant extent, a response to a context where not only is institutional support for the language insufficient, but mass mobilization and the organization of a counter-public sphere are suppressed: responsabilization is a response to the suppression of collective organization.

But beyond simply being a series of strategic counter-maneuvers to the existing plight of the Tibetan language, these discourses are also cobbled together from previously-existing and currently-available discursive resources. The idea that the Tibetan language is the soul of the nation is clearly an imported Romantic nationalist formulation.¹⁸ The idea of the Tibetan language as a singularity, oscillating between the descriptive and prescriptive, combines this Romantic nationalist ideology with pre-colonial standardist ideologies. But the important thing to note is that there is nothing necessary, pre-determined, or deeply 'Tibetan' about the discursive formation around language seen in these lyrics: it is an ad hoc, improvised bricolage that has emerged in response to an increasingly hostile colonial state.

This improvised, ad hoc status is important to keep in mind when we consider that for the quarter of a million Tibetans in the PRC who speak minoritized languages, these discourses of singularity, essentialism, purism, and moral censure add to their burden of erasure by the state. The idea that Tibetans have a single 'father-tongue', linked to a shared territory and identity, mirrors the erasure of minoritized languages by the state, and legitimizes and empowers assimilatory standardist ideologies. The idea that the single Tibetan language is essential to Tibetan collective identity abandons other languages to the subordinate status of surplus, rendering them disposable in the struggle to maintain Tibetan identity. The focus on purity further marginalizes these languages, many of which are considered to be 'mixed', indeed specifically tainted by contact with Chinese (Sonam Lhundrop, Suzuki & Roche 2019). Finally, the moralizing, didactic discourses of these songs forces a double bind on speakers of Tibet's

¹⁸ Tracing the routes through which this ideology became imported into Tibetan discourses is beyond the scope of this paper, but given how widespread and available this idea is, it almost certainly has multiple sources.

minoritized languages: either speak pure Tibetan, protect the nation, and claim your place within it, or abandon your claim to Tibetanness and open yourself to moral censure. This is a direct assault on pluralistic ideologies and the practices associated with them (including songs) that, in the pre-colonial era, played a vital role in maintaining multilingualism in Tibet.

Evident here is the tragedy and cunning of the PRC's colonial transformation of language ideologies in Tibet: that it is able to not only sustain its logic when confronted by resistance, but is furthermore able to mobilize that resistance to its own ends. Resistance to the state's subordination of Tibetan weaponizes ideologies of reverence against minoritized languages, adding yet another assimilatory pressure to these profoundly marginalized communities. The tragedy for speakers of minoritized languages, particularly those that accept their state-mandated identity as Tibetan, is that they are abandoned by both the state and the Tibetan community. The stifling ideological environment this creates for speakers of Tibet's minoritized languages can be understood through a re-reading of Lama Jabb's (2015) concept of the 'inescapable nation'. Whilst Lama Jabb intends this phrase to capture the durability and resilience of Tibetan identity, it also evokes another sense of inescapability, that of confinement, incarceration, internment. Whilst Lama Jabb sees Tibetan nationalism as an 'inescapable' challenge to Han supremacy, from the standpoint of Tibetans that speak minoritized languages, this inescapability refers to their ongoing and seemingly inevitable erasure.

6. Conclusion: The beginning of the end of erasure?

But nothing is inevitable.

If the enduring predicament of Tibet's minoritized languages in the colonial era has been one of erasure by both the colonial state and the Tibetan movement to resist it, then recent developments in pop music may indicate that this situation is changing. What I am referring to is the emergence of pop songs in minoritized languages. At present there are only a handful of such songs, all from Gyalrong, and all by musicians based in Chengdu. The earliest example I have been able to find appeared some time in 2018, by the singer Gesang Gyatso.¹⁹ Other performers who have joined him in using

¹⁹ <http://m.25xz.com/play/28184.shtml> (accessed 2020-11-23).

minoritized languages in song include Adong,²⁰ Sidan Mantso,²¹ and Danba Wangmo.²²

In creatively exercising choice over the language used in song (Brusila 2015), these singers are demonstrating that ‘...rather than merely reproducing existing ideologies, singers... may use music to actively think about, debate, or resist ideologies at play in the social world around them’ (Berger 2003: xv). Regardless of the intentions of these singers in using minoritized languages in their songs, their choice to do so contests a number of prevalent ideologies and their associated political programs. It contests the standardist and essentialist ideologies that have prevailed in Tibetan songs over the past decade, and instantiates, instead, ideologies of pluralism and authenticity. At the same time, this choice also resists the state’s efforts to erase and eliminate minoritized languages.

These songs are, therefore, protest songs. And they are protest songs about language. This is true regardless of the content of the lyrics or the intentions of the singers. Using these languages in a public forum makes important claims about appropriateness and value, as well as identity and belonging, that run counter to power. It not only risks moral censure from the broader Tibetan community for contravening the politics of unity, but also risks backlash—more likely in the form of commercial sanction than condemnation or censorship—from a colonial state that has consistently tried to erase these languages. Therefore, no matter what the genre, topic, and lyrical content of these songs, they are, in the words of Davis (2017: 54) ‘decolonial acts’ of ‘resistance, resilience, and survivance’.

In acknowledgement of this fact, I want to conclude by presenting the lyrics of one of Gesang Gyatso’s songs, written in Tibetan script.²³ As Brusila (2015: 27) reminds us in his discussion of language choice in song, such choices concern much more than ‘...whether the lyrics are understood by the audience.’ The same is true here. Language choice *in itself* communicates something, independent of the content of what is said. In light of the preceding discussion about the persistent efforts to erase Tibet’s minoritized languages, the presentation of these lyrics in this context is intended as an act of existential recognition (Graham 2005), and a

²⁰ <https://music.163.com/#/video?id=D87F1D2F0CA418D8402C54F462ACA69F> (accessed 2020-11-23).

²¹ <https://music.163.com/#/song?id=1394586784&userid=3219749658> (accessed 2020-11-23).

²² <https://music.163.com/#/song?id=1415580020&userid=3219749658> (accessed 2020-11-23).

²³ <http://m.25xz.com/play/28184.shtml> (accessed 2020-11-23).

confirmation that, despite assimilatory standardist ideologies and an ongoing colonial program of language oppression, these languages exist, and have a place in the world.

ཉི་མེས་ཀི་མ་བཤེར་ནིར་མེ་གི་དོ།
 སེམས་ཅན་གི་བཟང་ལྷ་མོ་གི་བསོག་ང་ཡི་ངོས།
 རྗེ་རི་གི་མ་བཤེར་གི་ཡམ་གི་བསོག་ངོས།
 ཀམ་གྲོ་མ་གཙོ་ན་གོ་ཐམ་ཅང་ནེ་ལྷམ།

ངེ་བད་ངེ་མི་ལོ་ལོ།

ངེ་མི་ལོ་ལོ། (repeat)

ཉི་མེས་གི་རྐང་ནིར་མེ་གི་དོ།
 གསེར་ཅན་མེན་ཉོག་གི་བསོག་ང་ཡི་ངོས།
 རྗེ་རེས་ཉིར་གི་གཞུང་ཤེ་མི་ཙོད།
 ངེ་སེམས་གི་སྐྱུག་ང་ཡི་ང་ན་ཉ་སྒྲོན།

ངེ་བད་ངེ་མི་ལོ་ལོ།

ངེ་མི་ལོ་ལོ། (repeat)

ཉི་མེས་ཀི་མ་བཤེར་ནིར་མེ་གི་དོ།

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